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Book Review

Millennium Development Goals: Looking Beyond 2015

Matthew Clarke & Simon Feeny (eds), Routledge, Abingdon, 2013, 109 pp.,
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As their 2015 deadline approaches, development practitioners and politicians alike are under growing pressure to account for why progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has been asymmetric, and why it seems likely that a number of MDGs will not be met. Indeed, the development world seems to be approaching an awkward juncture: a new framework for the post-2015 development agenda must be created, which is able to keep donors interested and optimistic while ensuring that past failures are not repeated.

Millennium Development Goals: Looking Beyond 2015 discusses current progress made towards the MDGs in the Asia-Pacific region and critically evaluates the policy framework used to pursue the MDGs. The book is a compilation of seven papers that were first presented at a 2009 conference for development practitioners and academics entitled 'Meeting the Millennium Development Goals: Old Problems, New Challenges' convened by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) – Universities Linkage Network. They were later printed together as a special issue of the *Journal of the Asia-Pacific Economy* in November 2011 (volume 16, issue 4).

Owing to the book's multiple authors there is no single theoretical framework that informs the book's entire analysis. Instead, the book provides a heterodox analysis of MDGs with each chapter adopting different perspectives ranging from political economy, neoclassical economics, political science, and sociological modes of thought. Common to all chapters, however, is the overarching theme that the current MDG framework is becoming increasingly inappropriate for achieving more inclusive, sustainable and better quality development outcomes. The book argues that what is needed after 2015 is a new approach to multilateral development initiatives; while stressing that simply repeating the MDG approach with a new timeline would be ineffective and irresponsible (p.10).

The book can be roughly divided into three parts. The first part comprises of the editors' introductory paper (chapter one) and another chapter by Jan Vandemoortele. Here, the authors place the Asia-Pacific region's recent development experiences into the context of the MDGs. The most pertinent of their arguments is that development policy makers and practitioners must explicitly address inequalities within countries to avoid undershooting MDG targets (pp. 6-7; pp. 16-18). Though strong economic growth has been central to achieving MDG progress in the region (pp.2-3), these authors provide several reasons for stalled progress on other MDG targets, stressing that there is a major disconnect between how we measure economic growth and broader goals of equitable and sustainable development. As long as considerations of inequality are absent from the MDG goals, targets and indicators, then a number of MDG targets will not be met. The danger of this being that the world will see the MDGs as "easily set but never met" (p.12), leading to a loss of political enthusiasm for global development initiatives.

The second theme, addressed by three chapters (pp. 21-70), considers issues surrounding the relationship between the MDGs and international aid. In chapter three, Hoffstaedter and Roche (pp.21-35) abandon traditional state-centric assumptions of aid studies to illustrate how recent attempts to improve the accountability of aid actors have been largely superficial. Using a comparison of Sub-Saharan and Melanesian weak states, they illustrate that aid

continues to be used according to the recipient state's desires rather than the needs of the poor within those countries. Following this chapter, Tanya Jakimow draws on her own primary research in North India to illustrate how 'empowerment' programmes of MDG-focused NGOs may actually rob the poor of social and economic agency (pp.36-53). For Jakimow, internationally and nationally determined development agendas like the MDGs are dictated down to the 'poor' by states and NGOs alike, turning the 'poor' into "objects of development" rather than "active subjects" (p.44). Next, Thomas W.D. Davis highlights the irony of the MDGs impact on aid agency operations from a 'new institutional economics' perspective (pp.54-70). He shows that MDGs have not shaped the priorities of donor country aid agencies to the extent MDG architects had originally hoped. Nor have the MDGs facilitated a closer alignment between donor countries' aid policies or 'national interests' and recipient countries' specific development needs (p.66).

The final two chapters address the third theme – development in practice – in the book. They provide country case studies that not only raise new issues about MDGs in specific country contexts but also reinforce problems raised in earlier chapters (although the findings are not explicitly consistent with the other papers in the book). Chapter six is a case study of Myanmar by Anthony Ware (pp. 71-88). Here, he claims the MDG framework is well suited to Myanmar's context, but the foreign policy interests of donor countries are preventing MDG-based aid partnerships from being set up. The final chapter provides a case study of maternal health in Lao PDR (pp.89-103) highlighting how measures of MDG progress (i.e. the UN-agreed indicators) disregard "quality" and "input" measures in favour of indicators. As a result, maternal health programs have ignored the root causes of beneficial change in maternal health in favour of improving only superficial aspects of maternal health problems.

This book is a useful text for anyone looking for a critical evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals in an Asia-Pacific context or with an interest in what issues will shape the post-2015 development agenda. Particularly interesting are the first two chapters that deal with the issue of

inequality. With the global civil society campaign “Beyond 2015” noting inequality reduction as critical priority (Beyond 2015, 2012) and with organisations such as the World Bank coming under increasing scrutiny for failing to explicitly commit to tackling inequalities, this topic is indeed looking to dominate the post-2015 agenda. The book’s papers on aid (each with a unique theoretical perspective) also offer policymakers and academics a rich set of studies whose contrasting perspectives highlight the deep structural challenges of creating new aid policies that are both effective and accountable to stakeholders. Furthermore, the book is well structured with the two case studies at the end helping to put the issues raised in the previous, more general and abstract papers into a practical and country-specific context.

Having said this, the book does have its shortcomings. Firstly, Anthony Ware’s Myanmar case study (pp. 71-88) was originally published in 2011 before the sweeping democratic reforms of Thein Sein’s presidency prompted a positive change in the West’s political and economic relationships with Myanmar. Thus, for those interested in the future of Western aid in the country, Ware’s arguments – which rest on assumptions of Western donor-country sanctions and non-cooperation – are of limited contemporary use. Nevertheless, Ware’s contribution is significant for historical analysis.

Secondly, Anna Scopaz *et al.*’s case study on Lao PDR (pp. 89-103) falls victim to a common misconception of the MDGs. As is made clear in the first two chapters of the book, it is wrong and dangerous to think of MDG targets as country-specific benchmarks (p. 14). MDGs are *global* targets and a country may not necessarily have “failed” if it does not, for instance, reduce child mortality by two-thirds but still reduces child mortality significantly given its initial conditions. However, Anna Scopaz *et al.* continue to benchmark progress in Lao PDR’s maternal health policies to MDG targets rather than more appropriate country-specific targets. Thus, their study provides a misleading evaluation of Lao PDR’s successes and failures. Having said this, this misconstrued idea of how successful Lao has been does not reduce the value of the paper’s analysis on what is preventing improvements in Lao PDR’s maternal health and their policy recommendations.

Lastly, the book could have benefited from the inclusion of a summary chapter at the end. Given the variety of perspectives and policy recommendations made by the authors, it would have been interesting to see *if*, and *how*, the findings of each paper could be synthesised into a clear policy or analytical position for the post-2015 agenda. Indeed, for readers hoping to find a clearly stated policy prescription for the post-2015 framework, this book may not be what you are looking for.

Overall, *Millennium Development Goals: Looking Beyond 2015* is an interesting and well-organized look at the successes, failures, and challenges that have emerged out of the MDG movement in the Asia-Pacific region. This reviewer warmly recommends *Millennium Development Goals: Looking Beyond 2015* as a valuable resource for the readers of the *African Review of Economics and Finance*.

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